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Semiotics and pragmatics of stage improvisation, by Domenico Pietropaolo. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; ISBN: 9781474225793 (£28.99)

Bloomsbury's recent release, *Semiotics and Pragmatics of Stage Improvisation* by Domenico Pietropaolo is a peculiarly structured volume due to the absence of introductory and concluding chapters. The purpose of the material is stated on the back cover as analysing 'improvisation as a compositional practice in the Commedia dell'Arte and related traditions from the Renaissance to the 21st century'. The acknowledgements page contains an explanation that some of the chapters were part of separate, longer essays, which accounts for the unusual structure and slightly disjointed flow of the work as a whole.

Divided into seven chapters, only one of which is dedicated to semiotics and two to pragmatics (the remaining chapters are on imagination, biomechanics, syntax and dramaturgy), the volume is nonetheless a coherent historical account of the development of Commedia, which clearly places improvisation at the centre of that art form. Pietropaolo argues passionately that improvisation in the Commedia context was a skill whose acquisition and refinement required great talent, intense training, and an extensive physical and textual performance vocabulary.

The first chapter works as a straightforward historical account of the development of Commedia from the late Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century, with an interesting section explaining how the performing arts were professionalised as a response to socioeconomic changes in Europe from the emergence of capitalist economics. Although this may not have been within the scope of the book, Pietropaolo seems to miss an opportunity for further comment here by comparing this shift with current operational trends in the performing arts industry. The description of 'skilled performers who offered their labour on a par with other productive activities in the new market economy and who strove to rise to a position of dominance in the developing entertainment industry' (p.4) may also be an apt depiction of contemporary performer movements in the United Kingdom's theatre industry (perhaps minus the word 'developing'). Since Pietropaolo himself suggests in the same chapter that it could be useful for a scholar to write about the history of improvisation 'regressively, starting with the present and proceeding rearward' (p.3), it is odd that he does not seem to seize this opportunity himself.

Further sections within this chapter concentrate on the interesting distinction between productive and reproductive imagination as tools for improvisation; the former meaning the creation of completely new material, and the latter, calling to memory material that had already been received or performed previously and re-arranging it. This section also focuses on providing the reader with a clear understanding of Commedia scenarios while emphasising the distinction between these and complete scripted plays, a notion Pietropaolo reinforces throughout the entire book.

The second chapter focuses on the pragmatics of derision in Commedia, introducing greater detail about stock

characters and what they represented, the first hint of semiotics applied to this analysis. Most of this chapter, however, simply continues the historical narrative through the Enlightenment, albeit including the intriguing rivalry between writers Carlo Gozzi and Carlo Goldoni, who used their respective pieces to try to save (in Gozzi's case) or to destroy (in Goldoni's case) Commedia altogether.

Chapter 3 is the only one exclusively dedicated to semiotics, and would perhaps work better if combined with chapter 5, which focuses on biomechanics. Although Pietropaolo's analysis should be understood as an attempt to study performance text by using language and thought processes outside more formal, text-based scholarship, his application of semiotics is rather fragile. Pietropaolo scrutinises some scenes from famous, documented Commedia performances and writes at length about the actors' use of their body and costumes, but rather than expanding on the representation of all these symbols, indexes and icons, his attempts at interpretative analysis are often frustrated by his desire to be truthful to an accurate, descriptive reconstruction of these performances.

Perhaps, understandably, the chapter containing an analysis that best approaches the formalist linguistics Pietropaolo has chosen as his method is chapter 4, focused on syntax. While explaining how improvisation works as a compositional tool, the concepts of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations are introduced to demonstrate how signs govern each other and how these can be used in dialogue situations. This all too brief chapter concludes with a slightly unclear section on a Markovian model of improvisation, which presupposes the reader's knowledge of Markovian chains.

Chapters 6 and 7 are more focused on the text and process of production, including sections on the *concertatore* (an

early form of dramaturg / director figure) and *lazzi* (improvised sections inserted at various points throughout a text). They conclude with a lengthy analysis of Gozzi's *Turandot* and an interesting take on the challenge of translating Commedia pieces to other languages and cultures, suggesting that the skill of the translator must necessarily exceed the linguistic to also encompass knowledge of stagecraft if the translated script is meant to be performed.

Overall, Domenico Pietropaolo's volume will be disappointing to the reader with a keen interest in semiotics, as it is nowhere near as thorough on the subject as the work of Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991) or Keir Elam (2002), all important theatre semioticians who do not merit a single reference in Pietropaolo's book. In fact, linguistics semioticians such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes are also absent from the book, with Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure getting only one mention each. The back cover information and title are slightly equivocal as well, since the volume focuses almost exclusively on Commedia dell'Arte, only superficially touching on other types of improvisation, with one section dedicated to pantomime and frequent comparisons to improvisation in dance and music. As far as more contemporary uses of improvisation, there is an all too brief commentary on Dario Fo's work and some criticism of improvisational trends in post-Stanislavskian theatre in North America.

Nevertheless, this is a valuable piece of work for readers with an interest in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, particularly an avid interest in what we know of the descriptive detail of performance improvisation, and would be a relevant addition to the toolkit of scholars and practitioners alike.

References

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About the review author

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